



**Testimony of Kevin Lembo, State Healthcare Advocate
Before the Public Health Committee, Connecticut General Assembly
In Support of Raised Bill 7069
March 5, 2007**

Good morning Senator Handley, Representative Sayers, Senator Roraback, Representative Carson, and members of the Public Health Committee. For the record, I am Kevin Lembo and I am the State Healthcare Advocate. I offer this testimony in support of Raised Bill 7069, An Act Concerning Access to Oral Health Care.

First, I'd like to commend the committee for raising this bill. We often receive calls from HUSKY recipients who have difficulty finding a dental provider. We hope that the legislative solution proposed in this bill will resolve one of the most critical access problems for Medicaid recipients, chronic under-funding of Medicaid oral health services. The reluctance of the Department of Social Services (DSS) to adequately address this problem over the last decade cries out for a well-researched, legislative solution. Advocates, consumers, nationally respected dental experts and actuaries have all come to a similar conclusion: that the reimbursement rates for dental services need to be raised to the seventieth percentile of dental charges and indexed annually, in order to significantly increase access for dental services and to improve utilization rates for dental services to meet the goals of the Medicaid EPSDT (Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment) program.

We need to place a higher value on the oral health of Medicaid recipients. For too long, we have disassociated dental care from the rest of healthcare. This is not just a poor value judgment, it belies common sense and the effects that poor oral hygiene have on overall health, work attendance, and the basic ability to get a job. To be sure, placing a higher value on oral health is not only about a significant investment in improving reimbursement rates, but we cannot increase access to these vital services without increasing funding. It is the essential first step. There are other issues that affect access to care, including administrative barriers, language issues, and geographical issues that need to be assertively addressed by DSS. However, the solution cannot be achieved without this increase in rates, and the rates must be directly passed through by the Medicaid managed care organizations to every provider of dental services.

Undoubtedly some people will come before you and say that reimbursement rates are not the issue, or that the level of increase in rates provided for in this bill is too high. We are currently spending on each HUSKY recipient the same amount we spent in 1995. That is unacceptable. I encourage you to place your reliance on the significant, expert research that was done by the oral health advocacy community to come up with this sound proposal. To date, DSS has not provided any expert analysis on this issue. Oral health access is a problem that needs your intervention. I ask for your support and for ultimate adoption of Raised Bill 7069.